

Four Medication Safety Tips for Older Adults

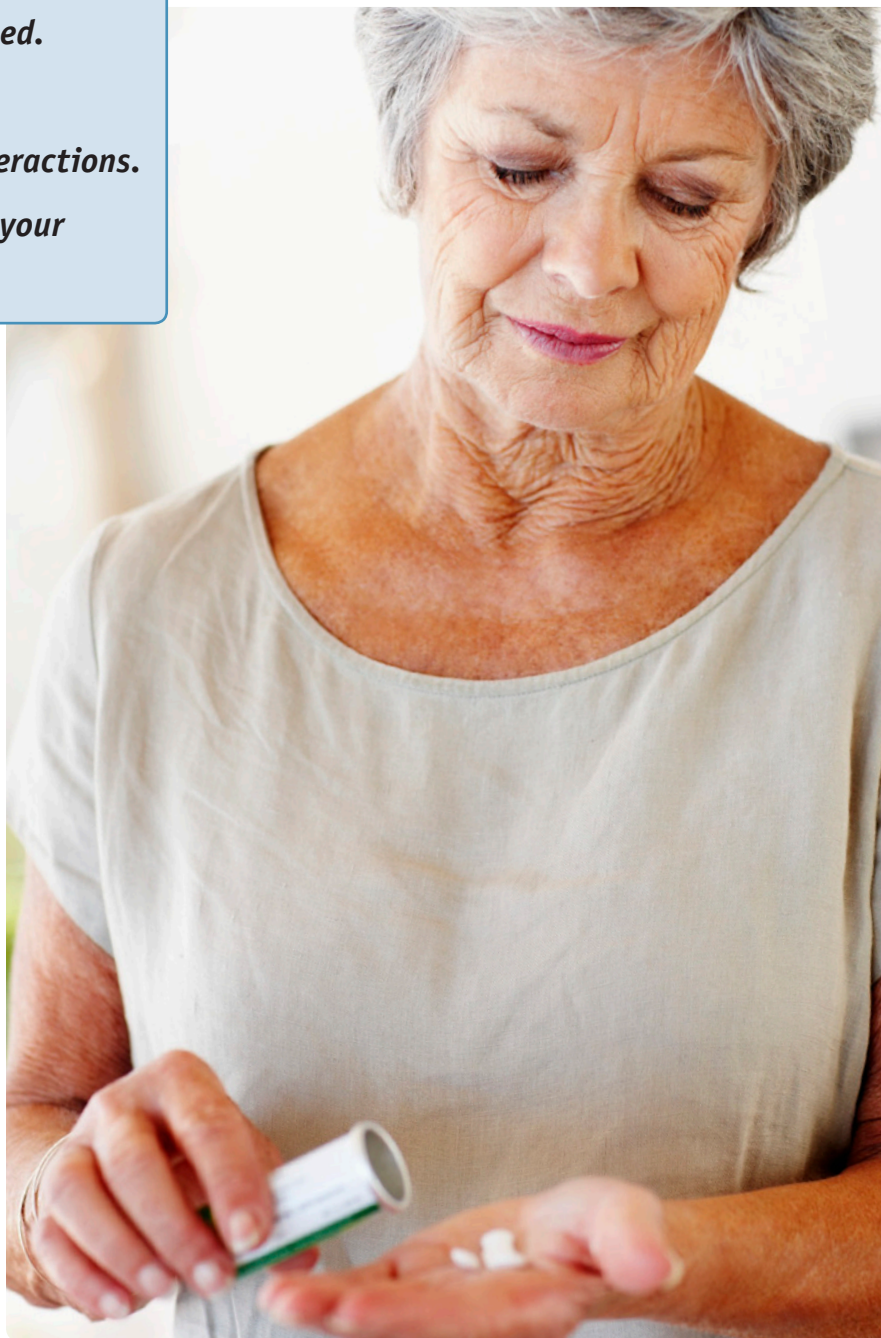
- 1. Take medicine as prescribed.*
- 2. Keep a medication list.*
- 3. Be aware of potential interactions.*
- 4. Review medications with your health care provider.*

Whether you're settling into your sixties or heading into your ninth decade, you should be extra careful when taking prescription and over-the-counter medicines. And if you're caring for older loved ones, you should help them stay safe.

The older you get, the more likely you are to use additional medicines, which can increase the chance of harmful drug interactions.

And, as we age, body changes can affect the way medicines are absorbed, leading to potential complications. For instance, your liver and kidneys may not work as well, which affects how a drug breaks down and leaves your body. And changes in your digestive system can affect how fast drugs get to your bloodstream.

"There is no question that physiology changes as we age. Many chronic medical conditions don't



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even appear until our later years," explains RADM (Ret.) Sandra L. Kweder, M.D., F.A.C.P., deputy director of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Office of New Drugs. "It's not that people are falling to pieces; some changes are just part of the normal aging process."

Read on for four important tips.

Take Medicine as Prescribed

Take your medicine regularly and according to your health care provider's instructions. Don't skip doses or stop taking medication without first consulting with your provider. (This holds true even if you're feeling better or if you think the medicine isn't working.)

"Medication can't work unless you take it," Kweder says. "For instance, medications that treat chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes typically only work when taken regularly and as directed. You have to take them continuously to maintain control over your condition."

Dosing for medications is based on clinical trials, which FDA reviews. "Every medicine is really different and is dosed according to what's been tested," says Kweder, which is one reason why you shouldn't select a dose yourself.

If you're having bothersome side effects or have other questions, talk to your health care provider.

Keep a Medication List

Write down what you're taking and keep the list with you. Consider giving a copy to a friend or loved one that you trust—an important step especially in case of emergency and when you're traveling.

Record the medicine's brand name, if applicable, and generic name. Also write down how often and what dosage you take. (For instance, one pill daily, 300 mg.)

Finally, note when you take each drug. "You should know your medicines better than the doctor does," says Kweder.

Be Aware of Potential Interactions

Remember, as you age, you're at higher risk for drug interactions.

Interactions can occur when:

- One drug affects how another drug works;
- A medical condition you have makes a certain drug potentially harmful;
- A food or non-alcoholic drink reacts with a drug;
- A medicine interacts with an alcoholic drink.

Your task? Learn which interactions are possible. You can do this by carefully reading drug facts labels on over-the-counter drugs and the information that comes with your prescription medications, and by reviewing any special instructions with your health care provider. For instance nitroglycerin, which treats angina (chest pain related to heart disease), should not be taken with many erectile dysfunction drugs, including Viagra and Cialis, because serious interactions can occur. And some drugs should not be taken with alcohol, as symptoms such as loss of coordination and memory loss can result.

If you're seeing multiple health care providers, tell each one about all of


your medications and supplements. You also can ask your pharmacist about potential interactions.

Review Medications with Your Health Care Provider


Schedule at least one annual review of your medications with your health care provider to confirm which medications are still necessary and which you can stop taking (if any).

If a certain medication seems out of your budget, ask your health care provider whether there is a cheaper, and still effective, alternative.

This review can help you avoid interactions and can lessen costs. Sometimes, especially if you're seeing multiple providers, certain questions can fall through the cracks, says Kweder. But, she says, there is no such thing as a stupid question about medicine.

"As a society, we have become reliant on pharmaceuticals to help us attain a longer and higher-quality life. It's a wonderful success of Western medicine," she adds. "The goal should be for each of us to access that benefit but respect that medicines are serious business. To get the most out of them, you should take them with great care and according to directions." 

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